



August 25, 1994

The Art of the Everyday

By JULIE IOVINE

ANOTHER type of artist might cringe, but Charlotte Culot is perfectly flattered if her paintings are called decorative. The Belgian-born artist, now living in southern France, simply invokes Matisse and the vibrant clash of his anything-but-tame interiors.

"I don't mind being called decorative at all," Ms. Culot said by telephone from Newport, R.I., where a show of her works closed on Saturday. "Little objects are what life is all about. People don't look enough at the things right there around them. And suddenly, they're gone. I try to enjoy every single piece."

Indeed, Ms. Culot paints with the humble stuff of everyday life. Her gouaches are layered with powdered pigments, with pencil and pastel drawings on kraft paper ("It was the closest thing to hand when I decided to start painting," she said) and with wallpaper she has torn from old houses to get a "crunchy texture."

"I go to these old houses where the wallpaper is rusty and rotting," she said. "It's really ugly, but if you focus on little pieces, you can take out the beauty of the details."

The subject matter of her still lifes, which are available through the Hope & Wilder Gallery in SoHo, is equally ad hoc and close at hand. Nothing is too lowly to be transformed by Ms. Culot's vision of simple beauty, even the shirts, gloves and belts crammed behind the doors of a cabinet. In her paintings, old flowered teacups resting on thick slabs of Provencal tile are enough to inspire a lyrical rendering. The tinniest enamel coffeepots become an ode to blues.

Ms. Culot, 30, was self-taught in the best sense of the word. She grew up in a house of artists. Her parents instilled in their only daughter a precise eye for detail. Her father, Pierre Culot, is a sculptor; her mother, Micheline Wynants, illustrated children's books. Recalling the 18th-century farmhouse near Brussels where she grew up, Ms. Culot said, "I was always surrounded by good taste, but not in an expensive way."

"My father chose furniture with soul: an old sofa together with something brand-new modern with shape he knew would last," she continued. "My mother was always filling the house with the things she picked up outside -- rocks, sticks, bones -- like Georgia O'Keeffe."

To these deeply ingrained influences, she has added the inspiration of the Impressionist artists Bonnard and Vuillard, Italian pre-Renaissance primitives of the Sienese school, and vernacular architecture. And of course, Matisse for his sense of color and insistently flat perspective. Clearly, hers is a calculatedly naive style.

"People just want to appreciate the simple joys of what moves them," she said.

At the show in Newport, held at the International Tennis Hall of Fame, the brisk sales of her 23 paintings, which ranged in price from \$600 for a very small work up to \$4,500, indicated that her "decorative" approach and simple themes had struck a deep chord.

Of course, Ms. Culot is particularly fortunate to be living in a place where the stuff of daily life is far more vivid than many an imagination could contrive: Le Barroux in the mountainous region of Provence.

The artist lives in yet another 18th-century farmhouse. This one is furnished quite sparsely, she said, characteristically emphasizing the evocative "objets" rather than the furniture itself: tiles, animal skeletons, and piles of the thick, cotton-striped fabrics of Provence that have been "washed and washed and washed."

Her boyfriend, a sculptor, has made most of the furniture from wood or iron salvaged from nearby vineyards. Their lamps hang with shades that they have fashioned from old legal documents covered in the decorative ink sworls of 19th-century script. "They cast the light of candles," she said.

Ms. Culot's passion for using her home as inspiration shows no signs of wearing out, although she has already documented practically every corner of the farmhouse. In fact, in her next series of paintings she is planning to take a closer look at the patterns on tiles and bedding materials. Even Matisse might have been impressed.

Photos: The stuff of daily life inspires Charlotte Culot's paintings. Here, a daybed covered in heavy Provencal cottons.; Simplicity is the rule in Ms. Culot's farmhouse.; Ms. Culot's 18th-century farmhouse and studio, left. Even the tinniest enamelware, below, is a fit subject for a Culot still life.; A flat perspective and intense color are key themes in Ms. Culot's work.; "People don't look enough at the things right there around them," Ms. Culot said. "And suddenly, they're gone." (Photographs by Patrick Van Robayes/Stylograph)